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Heterotopic Narratives of Identity in Tamas Dobozy's Short Stories

Récits hétérotopiques d'identité dans les nouvelles de Tamas Dobozy

Gertrud Szamosi

Abstract
Siege 13 (2012) is a collection of second-generation Hungarian-Canadian writer Tamas Dobozy's short stories. Dobozy's narratives address some of the central themes of diaspora existence: the importance of remembering, the vulnerable nature of identity in the face of personal and historical losses, and the uncertain boundaries between past and present, real and unreal experiences.

Keywords: Tamas Dobozy; *Siege 13*; Hungarian-Canadian writing; diaspora

Résumé
Siege 13 (2012) est un recueil de nouvelles signé par Tamas Dobozy, écrivain hongrois-canadien de seconde génération. Ses récits évoquent les grands thèmes relatifs à l'existence de la diaspora tels que les mécanismes de la mémoire, la fragilité de l'identité face aux pertes de l'histoire et de l'individu, les frontières floues entre le présent et le passé, entre les expériences réelles et non réelles.

Mots-clés : Tamas Dobozy ; *Siege 13* ; écrivain hongrois-canadien ; diaspora

Tamas Dobozy (1969) is a Canadian writer of Hungarian descent who has published three collections of short stories to date: *When X Equals Marylou* (2002), *Last Notes and Other Stories* (2005) and the most recent one *Siege 13* (2012), which was awarded the Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize in 2012. The emblematic title of the collection refers to the siege of Budapest, one of the longest and bloodiest battles of the Second World War. It started at the end of December in 1944 and lasted for 102 days. In the final days of the war, Russian and Romanian armies encircled the Hungarian capital, which was defended by Hungarian and German forces. As Stalin and Hitler wanted to achieve victory at all costs, the civil population of the city had to pay the price, and according to estimates 38,000 Hungarians perished, women were brutally raped, children murdered – in addition to the random executions and abductions that terrified the starving civilians.

In the course of an interview Dobozy explains why he chose the siege of Budapest from among the numerous tragic events of Hungarian history:

> [I]t left its mark on the collective and individual psyches of a generation of Hungarians, who then passed it on to their children and in some cases grand-children. [...] So clearly it's an event that really works on multiple levels – personal, political, historical, cultural – all at the same time, perfect material for a writer. In many ways, this is where I come from, this moment in history, so it was a personal exploration as well; trying to figure out if some of the enigmas and mysteries of my childhood – revolving around my immediate family – could be given narrative shape and sense. (Morefield)

Himself a second-generation Hungarian-Canadian, Dobozy highlights the impact of key historical events in the lives of subsequent generations. The stories of *Siege 13* also speak about the heavy burden of the past, which the surviving victims are doomed to carry and pass on to their descendants.

Spaces of difference

Siege 13 is a collection of thirteen stories that are set during or after the 1944 siege – either in Budapest or the adopted countries of immigrants. As the title of the collection indicates, the most obvious feature of the stories is their direct or indirect relatedness to the siege. The siege in Dobozy's book, apart from being related to the historical event, also functions as a trope that connects the narratives and their characters in the form of real life experiences, stories or memories that have been passed onto them. The events of the siege or references to them, which are often outside the immediate locality of the stories, function like a network that connects

the seemingly disparate lives and experiences of the characters. Thus, in many ways, the network operates like a heterotopia. In order to outline the central role of the siege and how the ontological and epistemological transformations of the characters that experienced it are related to it, Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia will be applied to the reading of Tamas Dobozy's texts below.

The etymology of the word heterotopia follows the template established by the notions of utopia and dystopia. The prefix hetero- is from Ancient Greek ἕτερος (héteros, "other, another, different") and is combined with the Greek morpheme τόπος ("place"). In Walter Russell Mead's witty summary, "Utopia is a place where everything is good; dystopia is a place where everything is bad; heterotopia is where things are different" (13). Heterotopia as a concept in human geography was elaborated by the French philosopher Foucault in order to describe places and spaces of otherness that are neither here nor there and that are simultaneously physical and mental, like the space of the moment when we see ourselves in the mirror. Foucault gives the following description of the process:

> From the standpoint of the mirror, I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself where I am. The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since, in order to be perceived, it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there. (24)

When applying Foucault's model of self-construction to the literary role of the siege in Dobozy's narratives, we find a similar model at work, in the context of which the different characters of the stories are trying to understand themselves with the help of an event that was not necessarily part of their real lives. Thus, in Dobozy's stories, the historic event of the siege that took place in Budapest at the end of the Second World War acts like a heterotopia, and as such it reveals essential aspects of diasporic identities by connecting them to imaginary or real events of the past.

Uncertain boundaries

The complex themes of belonging, home, and displacement are introduced in the opening piece of the collection. "The Atlas of B. Görbe" presents several of the recurring themes and motifs of the stories through the lives of its first and second

generation foil characters. The older writer, Béla Görbe, left Hungary during the communist regime and became an ambivalent but financially successful writer in the US. At the time of the story he meets the autographical writer figure of the protagonist, a second-generation Hungarian-Canadian on a Fulbright scholarship. In addition to the experiences of the characters, the past and present are also connected by the comparison of the two sieges, the one in Budapest and the other one taking place in America on 11 September in 2001. The most emblematic lesson of any war according to Görbe is: "It happened. It was bad. And afterwards? Well, it will happen again. And in between you forget" (9). Görbe's sarcastic moralising tone camouflages the painful life-experience of refugees and immigrants who, unable to forget, are condemned to remember their past. Görbe, similarly to the characters of his main work, *The Atlas of Dreams*, suffers from a curious inability to separate dreams from reality, or events of the past from those of the present. He simultaneously lives in two worlds, one of them among happy memories of the past that he shared with the love of his life Zella, and the other one amidst the desolate loneliness and fateful isolation of the present, where his schizophrenic wife is locked away in a psychiatric institute. Diasporic subjectivities often develop different forms of spiritual fragmentation as a consequence of their geographical and cultural dislocation.

When looking into the mirror, Foucault observes, "the mirror also casts a shadow that gives visibility to see oneself where absent" (4). The siege in Dobozy's collection fulfills a similar revealing function, as it casts an alternative and often strikingly different light or shadow on the characters and the events of the stories. This process can be best observed when in the concluding part of "The Atlas of B. Görbe" the protagonist, in his frantic search to reveal the secret and true nature of Görbe, has to face his own monstrosity on the other side of the mirror. Apart from the importance of remembering, the vulnerable nature of identity under the impact of personal and historical losses, and the uncertain boundaries between past and present, real and unreal, lived and dreamt experiences, the story also illustrates the powerful "side-effect" of the siege as it is capable of transforming the lives of its characters for subsequent generations. "The Atlas of B. Görbe," by illustrating the essential nature of diasporic rite of passages, helps to understand "how traumatic and wounding experiences construct identity" (Agne, 5).

Limits of transformation

The story "The Animals of the Budapest Zoo 1944–1945" is connected to the historically recorded event of the bombing of the Budapest Zoo in the course of the siege of Budapest, and it thus epitomizes the extreme monstrosities and damages of

wartime violence. In connection with the siege Dobozy claims that it was "in many ways an emblematic event of 20th-century Hungary – caught between one worse and another worse choice (the Nazis on one side and the Soviets on the other)" – the people were doomed to choose between two evils[1] (Morefield). The story starts with the departure of Oszkár Teleki, director of the zoo, who "was the first to run off that December when the Russian tanks entered the squares and boulevards, telling his secretary he was going to meet with the Red Army and insist that they respect the animals, and then asking her to pack all of the zoo's money into a bag, just in case" (25). As the narrative unfolds, we witness how the two zoo attendants, József and Sándor, struggle in vain to save the animals, who end up starving, freezing to death and falling prey to the hunting game of the Soviet soldiers. In the chaotic world of destruction, József and Sándor pass the time by reading books about ancient times and mythical transformations involving horses, flowers, hounds and people as if by erasing the physical boundaries between humans and non-humans they could escape the horrible constraints of the situation.

In addition to famine, injuries, and trauma, the attendants of the zoo also suffer serious physical and psychological wounds. The hallucination of József exhibits the way "trauma enter[s] the mysterious spaces of the human psyche to speak the unspeakable and reveal an 'underground' history" (Edwards, 149), taking place parallel to the real events of the world outside. With "an exasperated moan" (38) József observes

> that his friend was already half transformed, the hair wild around his head and neck, his fingernails much longer than József's and dirtier too, packed underneath with the hide and flesh of horses, and men and what else, reduced from malnourishment and injury and trauma to crawling around on all fours. (39)

The ambiguous nature of József's vision forecasts the enigmatic ending of the story when the zoo attendant witnesses the curious metamorphosis of his colleague Sándor, who either transfigures into the shape of the lost lion or sacrifices himself to feed the starving lion:

> It was Sándor's last gift, to József and the lion both, what he thought they needed to live, as if grief could work that way, though in the end it was only what he'd wanted: the death of whatever it was – affection, friendship, love – that kept him in place, reminding him of what he was and in that way of what he'd seen, when all he wanted by then was the roar and the leap – the moment when he was finally something else. (41–2)

1) The irony of the tragically entangled history is symbolised in this line: "When they returned to their nests Sándor would wonder what was more poisonous in the bellies, the flesh of the communists or fascists" (34).

As opposed to the importance of remembering, "the terrible logic" (41) of wartime morality requires the forgetting of everything that gets in the way of survival (40). The ambiguous ending of "The animals of the Budapest Zoo 1944–45" also poses several questions about the limits of identity and transformation. To what extent are we trapped within ourselves? Is it possible to escape physically and morally unbearable situations by changing shape? What happens to our lost selves? Can we retrieve them? By the end of the story, the ontological boundaries between real and fantastic are blurred to the extent that it becomes impossible to tell who or what is at the other end of the looking-glass.

Mutable identities

In Dobozy's stories, a constantly changing and mutable identity seems to be the real life-experience of several characters. In this context, the case of Árpád Holló is relevant. A respected member of the Hungarian community in Toronto, he has been running the Széchényi Club, a popular meeting place of Hungarian expatriates named after an ancient noble family. The central character of "The Beautician" is Holló, who back in Hungary under the communist regime served as a censor for the Ministry of Culture. According to Holló the "lesson of the siege" was, that it

> "had made it impossible to maintain anything – a politic, a community, an identity. One day we were subhuman – homosexuals, Jews, communists, gypsies – fit only for execution, and the next we were liberated, the proletariat, the people of the future. But the real lesson in all of this," said Holló smiling, "is that if we were only what they made us, then at the bottom we were really nothing. […] And if that was true then maybe, if I was smart enough, I could take that power for myself – free to change, to invent myself, to not have to conform to anything." (106)

Holló's case may embody a pragmatic survival strategy at a time when matters of life and death overcome moral concerns. In medical science "heterotopia" describes a kind of mutation, often referred to as a tumor, something abnormal that occurs in a place in which its elements cannot normally exist. Holló's mutating identity illustrates the heterotopic nature of the siege, or in a broader context the tumor-like nature of identity formation as a life-saving device under totalitarian regimes.

"The Beautician" initially refers to Holló, the ultimate survivor, who is always able to put on a new face and transform himself, until in the process he loses track, and realizes that underneath the "*fin de siècle* elegance with pomaded hair and well-cut suits, a fresh rose in his buttonhole" there is nothing left. As the story unfolds, the reader

witnesses Holló's manipulative assistance with the research work of an ambitious student in Central European studies. The narrator, like Holló, a member of the local diaspora community, is keen to reveal Holló's part in the machinery of communist censorship. The act of Holló handing over the documents of his immoral past can be seen as a final attempt to retrieve his long-lost self. However, as the crucial moment arrives, instead of submitting, the young man opts for destroying his manuscript and with that all remaining evidence against Holló. By the end of the story, the ambitious young protagonist learns a rather ambiguous, but perhaps ultimate, lesson of history: "our responsibility to others sometimes requires us to bury knowledge, even destroy it, though we've been told, over and over, that there's nothing worse" (138). The final transformation of the story occurs when the protagonist steps into the role of the beautician by burying the historical evidence against Holló, hence Dobozy's mutable characters once again illustrate the ripple-effects of historical trauma.

Lost selves

According to Foucault, when we look into the mirror we see ourselves in a place that in our real life doesn't exist. Similarly, in the case of Dobozy's characters, the siege displaces them from their former lives, relationships, and experiences and even from their familiar selves. This sense of displacement or absence is probably the most striking feature of diasporic existence, which has played a vital part in the lives of several generations. The painful wounds of suffering from the consequences of national and personal traumas often resurface in the haunting ghosts and shadow-like figures appearing in Dobozy's narratives. Lost identities are the connecting theme of "The Restoration of the Villa Where Tibor Kálmán Once Lived" and "The Ghosts of Budapest and Toronto." In the latter story, another victim of the siege, the raped and lost wife and mother figure of Mária, haunts the members of her family. As a result of Dobozy's complex narrative structure it is rather difficult to tell whether any of the characters have survived, since according to the members of the deserting Kálmán family, Mária did not survive the revolution of 1956 (306). As far as Mária knew, her husband, her son and the rest of her family disappeared when they were trying to escape from Hungary. The central figure of the story is Mária, who was brutally raped during the siege by the "liberating" soldiers of the Red Army (291). As a result of the savage act, she suffers from the symptoms of severe mental and physical breakdown. History has battered Mária's family on several occasions, as a result of which she often feels like falling apart. These rather unrealistic experiences are marked by the recurring appearance of haunting ghosts:

> what she called "other Márias" – the one whose father had died in the first World War and whose mother had died in the second; the one with the torn thighs and face; the one who'd been taken away in a Russian military truck for more of the same but had escaped when they stopped at a checkpoint; the one who'd then wandered the city until she was discovered by Béla, a soldier who nursed her back to health. They crowded her, these Márias did, making claims on her body as if it was common property, but there was only room enough for one, and Mária this Mária, was determined to make it her own. (296)

According to Justin D. Edwards, collective or personal trauma often recall the uncanny nature of gothic narratives (149). Similarly to her own ghosts, Mária lingers on and continues to haunt the characters of the story. Among them, the mother-deprived son reminisces: "how often he'd sat in bed as a boy, how often he still did, haunted by what wasn't there – the memory of a face, a touch, the voice you most wanted to hear – as if absence could live on in you like a ghost" (313). The ending of the story helps to resolve the mutually felt pain by the absent son for the mother, and the absent mother for the son. As the daunting feeling of emptiness lingers on, the final scene envisages the comforting reunion of Mária and her son Krisztián. The ghost of the missing mother reveals the emblematic nature of heterotopic experience as the traumatic losses entrap and prevent sufferers from moving on with their lives. The siege acts like a time-machine that hovers between past and present, so as to help the characters to gain sight of the lost parts of themselves. The often surreal and ambiguous experience that oscillates between realms of the real and the unreal could only be resolved with the help of recovering the past, or paradoxically, as the past has irretrievably been lost, they represent something essential that can never be understood. The above examples evoke some familiar traits of Canadian national literature, in which the "writing of trauma draws on the gothicism of powerlessness, pain, suffering, torture and repression" (Edwards, 149).

Subverted identities

The last piece in the collection resembles a powerful "danse macabre," which rather than representing the universality of death advocates the universality of life. Bobby, the hero of "The Homemade Doomsday Machine," is obsessed with the project of building a doomsday machine, and so the nine-year-old child prodigy invites the retired Hungarian wartime physicist Otto Kovács to their home. Earlier on, Kovács was known for experimenting with building an atomic bomb, first for the Nazis and later for the Soviets. Having survived the war, he fled to Canada and at the time of the story he lives in Toronto and tutors high school students in physics. The real-life

experience of walking along Toronto's downtown area recalls haunting images of the siege back in Budapest:

> I'd get up in the morning, go out for water, and right in front of my door there was some soldier, his head run over by a tank. Crushed flat. Brains everywhere. And it occurred to me that rather than building machines to destroy ourselves we were destroying ourselves to build machines. That was our inescapable purpose. (327)

Becoming witness to the experience of mass destruction alters the scientist's motives for building the doomsday machine: "as if the siege stretched right across history, as if the siege was all of history, and the only way to end it was to reach the threshold and refuse to carry anything human across" (331).

The conclusion suggests the futility of human experience – that, in place of creating a "super-weapon to rid the world of certain races [...], Kovács now wanted to get rid of all races" (328). Thus in Bobby's words, he turned into an advocate of "equal-opportunity genocide" (328). According to the "reformed" scientist, the "true evolution" (335) of our "overindustrialised" societies calls for an ecological siege, which should erase all forms of biological life in order to replace them with machines. Ultimately the doomsday machine turns out to be a hoax, in which the real-life experience of Kovács at the time of war gets subverted by refiguring destruction in the peacetime setting of contemporary Canada. In addition to exposing the universally familiar anxieties of having to live under the constant threat of some form of disaster, the story also provides a life-saving strategy by subverting and making fun of the notion of destruction itself. Thus the final scene of the story, when the adult Bobby pays a visit to his father and refers to "all that doomsday stuff" back in his childhood as a "very weird" event (339), may be read as an ultimate celebration of being able to put the past behind, and getting along with life.

Conclusion

Critical writings often emphasize the focus on dislocation and fragmentation as a prime experience articulated by diasporic texts (Palla, 139). Another recurring subject for scrutinising diasporic entities is that they are often represented as "fluid, changing with history, not fixed or pre-given" (Hua, 204). Apart from opening up new interpretations of identity, Dobozy's stories also unveil some of the highly vulnerable and traumatic experience of dislocation and displacement, loss and grief, transformation and alienation, the mutable nature of identities, together with their strangely oppositional restrictive and creative potentials. By putting the

siege into the focal point of the stories, it becomes a conceptual space that connects spatially and temporally diverse events, experiences, and memories and, as such, it becomes a representative event, a leitmotif as it were, of diaspora existence. In Dobozy's collection, the historical event of the siege becomes a meta-experience that connects the first-hand real-life events of past generations with that of the unlived and imaginary realms of their descendants.

In place of providing a convenient resolution, the rather unconventional and open endings of Dobozy's stories leave the reader with a disturbing sense of anxiety. Lacking the emotional resolution of a catharsis, the stories linger on and haunt the mind, similarly to the often unresolved and sealed off nature of our painful historical past. Tamás Dobozy self-consciously attributes this effect to the structural contrast between the crafted details of the individual stories and the fragmented nature of the collection itself. In effect he attains a "perfect form for trauma, which by its very nature is somehow horrifically specific but ultimately elusive or nightmarish" (Morefield). In Dobozy's narratives the central image of the siege, by connecting seemingly dislocated and often invisible events, delivers deeper forms of self-understanding. As we gaze into Dobozy's looking-glass, behind the historical events and characters of the stories we may catch sight of the multifarious nature of our own identities and by exposing universally familiar griefs and losses the stories also celebrate the powerful bond between our personal and national attachment to history.

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